Cahiers d'études africaines

160 | 2000
Varia

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Yvette Monga

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/46
DOI: 10.4000/etudesafricaines.46
ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher
Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 January 2000
Number of pages: 723-750
ISBN: 978-2-7132-1367-0
ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference
Yvette Monga, « *« Au village ! »* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 160 | 2000, Online since 06 December 2004, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/46 ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesafricaines.46

Yvette Monga

"Au village!": Space, Culture, and Politics in Cameroon*

Throughout Africa there has long existed a tension between the creation of parochial ethnic identities and the simultaneous creation of a unified national identity. Cameroon exemplifies this situation especially well. Economic inequalities and social injustice in the country have provided fertile ground for politicians to exploit cultural differences by engaging in a political discourse that emphasizes ethnic particularities and the importance of localities, with a recent focus on village affiliation and rural constituencies. The ethnicization and ruralization of politics in Cameroon have led political entrepreneurs not only to redefine the geo-cultural boundaries of their ethnic labels and "villages", but also to display their cultural differences as a way of marking their cultural space, distinguishing themselves from potential or actual "enemy" groups, and "recruiting" allies. Thus, depending on the circumstances, ethno-cultural space and to some extent villages themselves have been depicted either as "territories" to be defended against "invasion" by "strangers" from other parts of Cameroon, or "battlefields" in the political game of give and take with the regime. While politicians are thus sacrificing the very notion of a common Cameroonian nationality and identity, some artists and intellectuals have drawn on the same categories to try to break ethnic boundaries and define a popular national culture characterized by acceptance of ethnic differences.

This essay examines from a historical perspective the process by which the pervasive experience of economic and social injustice in Cameroon has come to be perceived and voiced primarily in ethnic and regional terms. It questions the extent to which expressions of ethno-cultural differences can be used effectively to pursue and achieve political goals. Finally, it

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop "Cameroon: Biography of a Nation" organized by Amherst College under the title "Ethnic-hood or Nationhood: the experience of economic inequalities and the performance of cultural difference in Cameroon" in November 1997. The author thanks Mitzi Goheen and the organizers of the panel for giving her the opportunity to initiate this reflection. She thanks Tessy Bakary, Sara Berry, Cyprian Fisiy, Ambroise Kom, Célestin Monga, and the late Professor Leroy Vail, for their comments on earlier drafts.

illustrates how the prevailing ethnic discourses coexist with a resilient sense of Cameroonian togetherness. Most the documentary evidence used in this paper was drawn from newspaper articles in the private Cameroon press, which, since the days of the National Conference in the early 1990s, has been one of the best places to take the pulse of Cameroonian society. I have also looked at dance, painting, theatre, and comedy-arts through which Cameroonians of divers backgrounds express themselves. As a complement to these popular sources, I have relied on scholarly articles on similar topics as well as my own first-hand observation of Cameroon and its political struggles[1].

A Social Injustice Experienced Across Ethnic Boundaries

In his newest music release, Petit Pays proclaimed his admiration for members of the Bamileke ethnic group by referring to them as the *Millionaires du Cameroun*. In so doing, the Douala-based *makossa*[2] musician was echoing a widespread belief that people from the Bamileke group are all wealthy and involved in business. From another perspective, the musician's statement expresses the popular view that Cameroon is divided into wealthy Bamileke and other, far poorer ethnic groups. In effect, the economic and social gap in Cameroon is sometimes expressed in a polarized ethnicism: the Bamileke versus the others.

The Bamileke are the largest of Cameroon's estimated two hundred ethnic groups[3]. Given their large number, it is not surprising that there are more wealthy people in the Bamileke group than in other groups, but there are also more Bamileke people living in a state of poverty in the shantytowns of Douala[4]. Nor are all wealthy Cameroonians Bamileke. Therefore, casting the pervasive experience of material deprivation and social injustice purely in ethnic terms is an oversimplification of the country's

1. The National Conference were a watershed moment in the political history of much of West and Central Africa. Opposition parties of the day called for a large national forum where civil society, as represented by political parties, non-governmental organizations, the private press, and other associations, would come together to create a new social contract making a total break with the old, ossified, one-party regime. Despite government censorship, the Cameroon private press was instrumental in echoing popular anxieties about the future of Cameroon as a nation, and the need to hold a national conference (cf. EBOUSSI BOULAGA 1993).
2. A type popular music with Duala origins. For convenience, we will write "Duala" when referring to the ethnic group and "Douala" when referring to the city or to last names.
3. About seven millions, that is, half the population of Cameroon. But these are unofficial sources. The results of the last national census held in the late 1980s were never made public. This statistical gap reveals the importance of number in Cameroon's domestic politics.
4. This is simply explained by the probabilistic rule of large numbers.

complex reality. Though economic deprivation, political disenfranchisement, and social injustice affect the vast majority of the citizens these issues are usually and increasingly framed in ethnic terms. The question that comes to mind, then, is what is wrong with Cameroonians? In trying to answer this question, I suggest looking at the approach to politics embraced by Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, and continued by his successor, Paul Biya.

Ahidjo, the founder of the Union camerounaise (Cameroonian Union) became the first president of Cameroon in 1960, after a period of anti-colonial unrest organized by the Union des populations du Cameroun (Union of the Populations of Cameroon), a radical nationalist party that denounced him as a sell-out to French interests. In 1961 British Southern Cameroons chose by plebiscite to join French Cameroon and together they formed the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Furthermore, Cameroon is made up of a mosaic of ethnic groups with different cultures, social structures, and systems of belief. Then, as today, the size and density of these groups were unequal, as were the distribution of natural resources, and the exposure to western education and ideas. As head of the new federal republic, Ahidjo faced the challenge of creating a country, and developing a new national consciousness among a group of peoples with different colonial experiences, political memories and convictions (Joseph 1977: 343-345).

Confronted with the task of reducing regional disparities and promoting a harmonious national development, Ahidjo adopted a policy of "regional equilibrium" *(équilibre régional)*. The goal of achieving regional equilibrium was pursued through a set of government policies. First, the number of civil servants employed by the state was greatly increased to open up opportunities for educated Cameroonians. Second, a system of differential standards and quotas was applied to professional and technical positions in areas such as public health, engineering, journalism, the civil service, teaching, agricultural services, and defense with the intention of reducing obvious disparities. Candidates from "disadvantaged" regions were allowed to pass their examinations with lower grades than those required of candidates from "advantaged" regions. Similar quotas were used to create spaces for those from areas with few educational facilities and to restrict spaces for those from areas with abundant schools. In other words, the determination of just how many candidates from each ethnic group or region should pass a given national examination was made according to an ethnic alchemy aimed at achieving social justice. Access to high state offices was also determined by an ethnic equation. This means that Ahidjo's policy of pursuing and implementing social justice was not concerned with giving all Cameroonians a *fair chance* to gain access to certain state-sponsored opportunities, but rather with making sure that each region and "main" ethnic group in the country had a *fair access* to these opportunities[5]. Fairness of access to

5. To some extent, Ahidjo's policy of positive discrimination was a revisited version of the colonists' rule of divide and rule.

high state positions became the main guiding principles of political action[6]. The very notion of fair access was soon equated with *fair distribution* of available state resources along ethnic lines. But it depended on the relative political weight of the ethnic groups in place: the more politically significant ethnic groups could negotiate fairly good access to these resources whereas the others could not stand the competition.

This emphasis on regional and ethnic identities resulted in the creation of an acute, sustained awareness of ethnic belonging and regional affiliation. It also opened the gates to criticisms and disputes concerning the distribution system itself. For example, ethnic groups perceived as already naturally "favored" saw the quota system as an injustice and resented the fact that their ability to expand their opportunities was fettered to "protect" minority groups; the "disadvantaged" groups on their part lived under the constant fear that their "places" or share might be taken away by other, more qualified people. Tragically, people of merit from these last groups also suffered the backlash of the quota system, because they had to bear the condescending or suspicious gaze of all those who believed that their success was undeserved in terms of merit[7]. The politics of regional equilibrium ingrained in the minds of Cameroonians the notion that access to state functions and places in professional schools depended not primarily on competence and merit, but instead on one's ethnic and regional affiliations. Consequently, Cameroon as a geographical entity began to be increasingly perceived and represented in terms that conveyed this ethnic message: the country was nothing but an aggregation of resources, a gigantic "pie", to be "fairly" distributed among ethnic groups[8]. They participated in the distribution through their putative "representatives" who were called to the trough by the head of state. Despite the ethnic-based, region-oriented philosophy behind the principle of regional equilibrium, Ahidjo was able to promote and sustain a certain degree of national consciousness—or better, national consensus—thanks to a strong political regime and an expanding national economy that permitted him to extend his largess to various groups on an increasing scale.

When he resigned from power in 1982, his ethnic politics were carried on by his successor Paul Biya, who even took them several steps further. However, Biya's reinterpretation of regional equilibrium should be understood against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis beginning in the mid-1980s, that caused the so-called national pie to shrink and leading to

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6. W. JOHNSON (1970) refers to this as "allocation of authority".
7. Most of these critiques were expressed in 1990-1991; they were collected in an anthology of ethnic complains (cf. COLLECTIF CHANGER LE CAMEROUN 1992). This debate is not unique to Cameroon, for it sounds much similar to debate on the long-term relevance of the Affirmative Action principles in the US.
8. In the same lines of analysis, F. NYAMNJOH (1999) writes that "to many people in or seeking high office, Cameroon is little more than a farm tended by God but harvested by man". See also J.-F. BAYART (1993).

the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs that resulted in restrictive budgetary policies with massive layoffs in public functions and state-sponsored companies. Furthermore, the restoration of multiparty politics in 1991 has undermined the political authority of Paul Biya, necessitating the reinvention of new means of achieving "popular" legitimacy. Indeed, with Biya the idea of Cameroon as a pie has become so common that the very notion of democratic representation needs to be revisited when accounting for the sociopolitical innovation taking place in Cameroon. First, the head of state is likened to the "big man", or "*big katika*"[9] whose main role is to preside over the distribution of resources, making sure that each ethnic group receives its share of the national pie. Second, the new political actors are now called the "elite", either "internal" if they live in rural areas or are traditional rulers, or "external" if they are urban dwellers. The urban elite in this system are not considered to be representatives of urban areas but rather of their respective putative "villages". This is especially the case when the urban elite member is appointed to a high state function[10]. Third, despite the prevalence of ethnic discourse in most political debate in Cameroon, the real issue behind that rhetoric is not ethnic resentment *per se*, but rather "fair" distribution of state resources along ethnic lines. Two political cartoons published in private newspapers underscore this point of view. The first cartoon was published when Cameroonians started feeling the effects of economic crisis in their "pocketbooks" around the mid-1980s; it showed Ahmadou Ahidjo pulling a bag full of coins with a hole in the bottom; the coins that feel out were picked up by passerby. Next to Ahidjo was Paul Biya, sweating and pulling a bag of coins similar to Ahidjo's yet bigger, yet tighter and with no hole at all. There were also no lost coins for anyone to found. The legend simply reads: "Ahidjo ate, but at least he left behind some scraps for us." Thought the cartoon critiques the differences between the two president's implementation of the notion of regional equilibrium, it does not question the principle itself. The cartoonist's aim was not to question the pie policy but rather to advocate its proper execution[11].

The second cartoon dates from the beginning of 1990 and featured a Cameroon divided into provinces, with the names of high state officials and their positions inscribed within the provincial boundaries. It demonstrated the acceptance of the pie policy by the majority of the Cameroonians.

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9. The word "Godfather" from the Sicilian *mafia* is the closest concept that best convey the idea of "*Big Katika*". This expression was made popular in Cameroon during the late 1980s by the singer-activist, Lapiro de Mbanga, in his release, "*Mimba we*", understand "remember to share the pie with us".
10. But the system does not always run smoothly. Nana Sinkam a high-ranked international professional was appointed Minister of Finance by Biya. But the man refused to take office, to the great disappointment of people of his village, who waited in vain for the Godot to show up for the celebrations.
11. For more on political cartoons in Cameroon, see C. MONGA (1997b).

Political cartoonists in Cameroon have taken to reconfiguring the country's political map after each formation of a new government (Anonym 1997a)[12]. By so doing, they provide an unmediated visual support to regional claims, while adding a graphic effect to the great variety of ethnic discourses already dominating political debates. They also contribute to heightening the level of ethnic awareness induced by fierce competition for diminishing state resources. In some way, the political significance of such a representation goes far beyond its obvious ethnic message. Cameroon, which has barely been a nation[13], would now potentially cease to exist as a geographically entity or territory, becoming a discontinuity of coexisting physical localities. How have these localities come to be produced?

The end of the 1980s, the Fall of the Berlin Wall, French President François Mitterand's speech at La Baule announcing that financial aid to his French-speaking African partners would be tied to their progress towards democracy, all of these put pressure on the Biya government. Internally, critiques against the Biya regime increasingly voiced publicly, especially following the Monga and Njawe trial of February 1991[14]. The frustration of the population was compounded by a persistent economic crisis and rumor of massive layoffs in the bureaucracy and state-owned companies. Biya eventually conceded the multiparty system and even organized multiparty elections, but he did not allow government's institutions to function freely. Popular demands for a real democratic change and a credible system of political accountability were met with a stubborn refusal by president Biya. He also used his extensive executive power to impose his rules on the legislature, the judiciary and the military and has maintained power despite the strong discontent of the people towards his government and his party[15].

One of the gambits he used to undermine the advent of a real democratic society was the implementation of a new mode of government based on the concept of "village". The notion made its first appearance in the political lexicon of Cameroon during the presidential and legislative campaigns

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12. This map was up-dated after the constitution of the new government following the October 1997 presidential election (cf. ANOMYM 1997c).
13. Defining nation as the product of history, I suggest that widely-spread myths and a biased official history had led to exclusion of dissident histories and historical memories, contributing to the creation of ethnic stereotypes and hindering the emergence of an integrating Cameroonian nation (cf. Y. MONGA 1997; MBEMBE 1992). For a general discussion on nation as a product of history, see CONNOR (1990).
14. Célestin Monga, wrote an open letter in *Le Messager,* criticizing Biya for claiming that he has "given" democracy to Cameroonians while, in reality, Cameroonians were still subjected to economic inequalities, maltreatment from the police and the military, and that the parliament was only a token institution. The trial of Monga and Njawe stirred up unrest nationwide and for the first time since the independence, Cameroonians protested openly against the regime again.
15. It is not sure that the 92,37% ballots cast in favor of Biya during the last presidential (non)election really reflect the scope of his popularity in the entire country.

of 1992 and was articulated by law professor Roger-Gabriel Nlep of the University of Yaounde. In a televised debate Prof. Nlep argued that Cameroon politics have functioned on the basis of an "equilateral triangle" formed by three geopolitical regions dominated by three main ethnic groups: the North and the Muslim Fulani, the South and the Beti, and the West and the Bamileke. According to Nlep, these three ethnic groups had dominated the political and socio-economic life of Cameroon since independence to the exclusion of all others[16]. Therefore, for the others ever to have a chance to play a part in the political game, candidates for office should henceforth campaign and run for elections in their own "electoral village"[17]. A handful of politicians soon articulated their support for this idea; the "village solution" was also perceived as an antidote to the so-called Bamileke's threat; that is the fear by other groups that the Bamileke people, who already had a large presence in the economic sector and were very often migrants throughout the country might also grab political power. The principle of the electoral village was then applied not only to electoral seats, but to access to high state services as well. Consequently, people appointed to high positions soon saw their appointments not as recognition of their merit and personal value but rather as the head of state's generous response to their villages' complaints. Commenting on his appointment, for example, the new director of the National Security declared that it was an indication that "the head of state paid great attention to the complaints of the populations of the Sanaga Maritime Division. The Babimbi sector had needed a Minister for a long time; and now it is all set" (Tagne 1997a: 9).

Presidential appointments instantly transform new appointees into their villages' representatives and make them spokespersons for *their* populations; the latter are then requested by these spokespersons to express political support of the president as payback. These marks of gratitude are expressed in several different ways: promises to combat the influence of opposition parties in the rural areas; great publicity about "motions of support" sent to the president; and promises to vote overwhelmingly for the president and his party's candidates in all upcoming elections. One of the main purposes of this political *mise en scène* put in place in early 1990s was to oppose a counter claim of grassroots support to the claim of widespread unpopularity denounced by opposition parties. But it also served to cloud the reality of political alienation experienced by the masses and rural populations in particular[18]. These motions of support partake of a cult-of-

16. For an assessment of geo-political "allocation of authority" in postcolonial Cameroon up during Ahidjo's reign, see NGAYAP (1983).
17. Asked whether the electoral village should be a native or adoptive village, Nlep attempted to qualify his idea, suggesting that it could well be an adoptive village. But he emphasized warnings against hypocrites who, while claiming to represent their village of adoption would be defending in reality the interests of their native village. His readers could easily guess what he really thinks the electoral village should be. For further details and references on this issue, see NKOT (1998).
18. A notable and increasing segment of urban masses, who were the main actors of the political turmoil during 1990-1994 have shifted their attention away from

personality tradition common to one-party and *de facto* one-party systems in Africa and elsewhere. Most importantly, the principle of the electoral village ultimately instituted a complex game of give and take: first, between the president as *state resources provider* on the one hand and the villages and their representatives as *rural ballot providers* on the other; second, between the village representatives as *state resource mediators,* and their village populations as *rural constituencies;* and, lastly between the president again as *state resources provider* and the village representatives as *rural ballots mediators*. This arrangement is clearly demonstrated in the following examples. After his appointment, a village representative declared in an interview that his "ambition [was] to make the Sanaga Maritime [an administrative division] a political fiefdom of the RDPC [Cameroonian Popular and Democratic Party, henceforth CPDM]... and make sure that it will win all local elections" (Tagne 1997b: 9). Another one expressed in a speech his deep gratitude to the president for appointing him to the Central Committee of the ruling party and promised him his "permanent, total and unconditional support" (Endalle 1997a: 5). Showing his satisfaction upon receiving a brand new medical facility from a village representative, a chief, speaking for the rural constituency, declared:

> "We had already scored 100% in favor of the CPDM during the Municipal campaign and with no condition attached. Since there are others elections coming up, we will vote 98% for the CPDM, because I reserve 2% of the votes to the opposition parties. After all, Bassamba is cosmopolitan village" (Anonym 1997b: 9).

Whether or not this chief is actually in the position to force his fellow villagers to vote for the CPDM is not the issue. The point, rather, is that the recent transfer of the focus of national politics to the villages has provided the rural elite with a new sense of political empowerment[19]. Only such a sense of empowerment can explain for example why some village leaders felt that they could travel to Etoudi, the site of the presidential palace, to express their disappointments and demand a better "place" for their village representatives after a series of appointments (Atangana 1997: 10). It also explains why they would withhold their public statement of

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political activism to economic survival. Professionals are more concerned with company privatization, downsizing, and career redirection than signing petitions or attending political gatherings. Following the severe loans conditionalities of international donors and development agencies, civil servants aware of their precarious status are more anxious than ever to "eat where they are tethered", that is to amass as much wealth as can and as soon as possible before an eventual layoff. For more on village and electoral politics in Cameroon, see the vol. 68 (3) of *Africa*, 1998.

19. This development underpins to some extent the critique formulated against the "urban bias" theories, that it does not take enough into consideration politics, but analyses the relationships between the rural and urban sectors only in economic terms (cf. VARSNEY 1993). For more on a critical assessment of the links between cities and villages see TRAGER (1998).

support until they obtained from the president an assurance that their representative would remain "in place" (Anonym 1996a: 5). Furthermore, material resources in the forms of cash or various form of equipment received from the urban elite in theory benefit the whole village. But one must stress that ordinary village dwellers are not reaping the same profits as the rural elite is from the new trend (Mahatma 1997: 3). There is no convergence of interests among village populations just because they all dwell in villages; instead, the convergence of interests operates at the top level between the urban and the rural elites working hand in hand. This also means that, despite instances of strong ethnic hostility such as the rallies organized against the Bamileke by the Duala in February 1997, the current social and political problems of Cameroon cannot be explained in ethnic terms, alone.

Indeed, the politics of ethnicity in Cameroon are substantially more complex than simple anti-Bamileke protests and indicate at least two classes of top actors: (1) a cross-ethnic urban elite sharing common political and economic interests; and, within each ethnic group, (2) a handful of urban and rural elite working for their mutual benefit. The point here is that ethnic bonding does not supersede class affiliation, as illustrated recently by the case of Souop Lazare, a working tailor and a militant of an opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). During the 1996 municipal election, Souop was elected mayor in Douala III, one of the city's five municipalities. But was never able to occupy that position because the leadership of the SDF wanted him to leave the post and to *appoint* as the mayor a Duala native who had just joined the party. Souop refused to yield and as result was ousted from the SDF. This incidence was significant because Souop Lazare was only one of four Bamileke elected mayor in Douala. But as a "simple tailor", he lacked the political connections, economic power, and high social status enjoyed by his other Bamileke counterparts (Zanga Zanga 1997: 2). Thus, though members of a different ethnic groups, the well-connected Bamileke mayors belonged to the same social class and shared the same interests as any other member of the Duala elite: in this case, class solidarity superseded ethnic loyalty. Furthermore, despite the fact that the SDF had promised "radical" changes in Cameroon's politics and had been (until now) one of the opposition parties unwilling to compromise with the Biya regime, this incident demonstrated that it was no less involved in "village" politics than the more "moderate" opposition parties. In invoking the principle of the electoral village to change the result of the ballot box, the SDF clearly demonstrated that it was still limited in its aspiration for drastic change and vision for the country's future[20].

Along with the recasting of national politics in apparent ethnic and rural terms, there has been an ever-stronger intertwining of the political and economic spheres. This intermingling has taken the form of the personalization

20. For more on the SDF, see TAKOUGANG & KRIEGER (1998).

of taxation, utility bill collection[21], reimbursement of bank loans, payment of customs duties, grants of import monopolies, trade licenses, public contracts, and so on. In reality, this phenomenon is not new, but it has been greatly enhanced by the recent process of privatization. Throughout the country, businessmen are getting involved in politics to secure their economic assets while politicians and state officials are using the authority and the hindsight derived from their state position to develop a business portfolio. And this is just another form of state corruption. This situation exemplifies what observers of the African political scene have already denounced as the "criminalization" of the state (Bayart *et al.* 1999; Péan 1988). New social actors called *feymen,* a category of con-men involved in all sorts of international traffic, have appeared. *Feymen* usually appear on the economic scene overnight as wealthy "businessmen", though little is actually known about their exact activities. In general, they do not belong to the presidential *entourage* but are politically well connected. They are recognized by their flashy lifestyle and easy money (Kala Lobe 1997: 11). They also set an example for a substantial segment of the younger population. For all these reasons, the emergence of the *feymen* might well signal a new departure in the country's political and social life. Politically, their acquaintance with the circles of power indicates that Cameroon might be moving to a greater level of state criminality. Socially the tolerance, if not the popularity of *feymen,* poses serious questions with respect to the value standards of Cameroonian society especially as many Cameroonians victims of *feymen* confidence's schemes were otherwise respectable citizens who yielded to their lust for easy money.

The increased importance of village affiliation and rural constituency in Cameroon's politics has resulted in the reconfiguration of ethnic and village boundaries to fit the political ambitions of the moment. Ethno-politicians have emerged also as culture brokers. They are defining new identities, inventing new cultural practices, and manipulating the content of existing cultural institutions in an attempt to substantiate their ethnic-based politics.

Political Reconfigurations of Ethnic and Village Boundaries

The geographical boundaries of ethnic groups in Cameroon have been characterized by their fluidity and ability to respond to changes in the overall national sociopolitical and economic context. During his twenty five year reign, Ahidjo had the power to interpret Cameroon ethnic terms in ways that fit his political agenda, and he alone designed the configuration of geo-ethnic divisions on the political chessboard. These divisions reflected his

21. Taxation as a political weapon is not a state-only practice. During the apex of social and political turmoil of 1991-1992, the non payment of taxes and utilities bills was considered as significant political acts of civil disobedience; so was the non respect of traffic lights...

own view of the significant political forces at work in Cameroon then and provided the framework for his policy of regional equilibrium. Besides the labels of specific ethnic groups such as Bamileke, Beti, Bassa, Baya, Fulani, Bafia, or Duala inherited from the colonial ethnography, polarized terms such as "Nordists" and "Sudists" "Anglophones" and "Francophones", and even Christians and Muslims were constructed and made to serve as quasi-ethnic labels. The novelty introduced in this process by Paul Biya was to "democratize" ethnic labeling by moving the center of production of such definition to local political entrepreneurs and culture brokers who have acted simultaneously in two apparently contradictory ways, at a regional and local levels.

At a regional level, the project of ethnic reconfiguration has followed a logic of expansion. Considering the overall context of competition for bigger shares of the national pie, politicians depicting themselves as socio-cultural engineers used a discourse of regional integration aimed at "recruiting" "allies" from neighboring groups sharing cultural similarities with their own ethnic group (Geschiere & Gugler 1998). It is argued that while each will maintain its political autonomy, they should come together as aggregated entity and stress their common cultural identity. This has occurred to some extent with the group called "Beti", which has been expanded to include ethnic groups like the Boulou, the Ewondo, the Eton, the Bafia, and the Baya who were previously seen as distinct ethnic groups. The Beti group is also called, derisively the *Pays organisateur* (Host Country), an expression imported from the soccer field to the political arena in order to express the common Cameroonian idea that a country hosting an international soccer event cannot afford to "lose" the game. Put differently, since Paul Biya belongs to the Beti group, the latter are "entitled" to the best portions of the country's assets.

The recent political prominence gained by the concept of Sawa identity provides another example of the expansion of ethnic frontiers. The denomination "Bonasawa" (*sawa* meaning coast and *bona* people of) or "Sawa" subsumes all the ethnic groups dwelling in the Cameroonian littoral zones and includes the Bakossi, the Bakweri, the Balong, the Abo, the Bassa-Bakoko, the Babimbi, the Batenga, the Bodiman, the Yabassi, the Banen, the Duala, the Bojongo, and the Jebale. These various groups have been aggregated into one global society, the Coastal Bantu, who are conceived of as being in opposition to the people living in the forest, the desert, or the hinterland regions. The Coastal Bantu thus are defined as "People of Water" in contrast with the "People of Land". Yet another new ethnic identity in the Cameroon politics is that of "Grassfield". Originally applied primarily to the Bamileke ethnic group, this label has been expanded to encompass all the populations living on the high plateaus of western Cameroon, including Anglophones from the North-Western province and Bamileke Francophones from the Western provinces. The new expression "Anglo-Bami" has been coined for these groups; it renders the space of their ethnicity and also illustrates the new political and ethnic dynamic.

A trickier, and potentially more peace threatening "ethnic" denomination in contemporary Cameroon politics is that of "Anglophone"[22]. Linguistically, the term appears clear, seemingly designating a person with some degree of familiarity with English culture. But in reality, the domain of "anglophony" and the frontiers of "Anglophoneness" are less clear-cut than one might think. Anglophone is actually applied to all Cameroonian natives of the South and North-Western provinces regardless of their actual dwelling place or familiarity with the English language[23]. It therefore refers to a space historically marked by a British presence and corresponds to the former territories of Southern Cameroons. But yet again, this spatial definition is not enough for the Cameroonian administration and poses a special "technical" problem. "Francophone" Cameroonians whose parents migrated to that part of the country during the colonial period as workers on European plantations, as political refugees fleeing the civil wars in the 1950s (Michel 1970; Ardener 1960; Stoecker 1960), or who moved there more recently for personal reasons are not recognized the status of "real" Anglophones by either the administration or the Anglophone "natives". This can be explained in terms of the increased competition for diminishing state resources which has forced ethnic politicians to pay greater heed to ethnic origin and the "village". Because the children of "Francophone immigrants" in Anglophone provinces can also claim a tribal and a village affiliation besides their Anglophone status, this raises question about their actual loyalty. Consequently, they find themselves in an awkward position: while they are not recognized as of "Anglophones" by local people, they are also not recognized as "Francophones" in their parents' "province of origin". This "social" ambivalence put these outsider Francophone Cameroonians in a sort of "ethnic *impasse*", a dead end with which they have attempted to deal by adopting a new self-identity: the "Eleventh Province" (Geschiere & Gugler 1998: 313-314). Cameroon has only ten administrative provinces, and this denomination was purposely employed to emphasize the particularity—and peculiarity—of this category of Cameroonians. According to Cilas Kemedjio, the members of the Eleventh Province are actually the only ones deserving the name of "Cameroonians": as they do not belong to any of the existing administrative divisions, their real sphere of definition and the only one available to them, is therefore the nation of Cameroon itself. This point of view is highlighted by the fact that members of the "Eleventh Province" come from all different parts of the country (Kemedjio 1997). But in any case, the Anglophone (or Francophone) label does not suppress

22. For a long time the "Anglophone problem" was addressed by Anglophone scholars alone. Only in 1992, was it addressed publicly by a Francophone in an interview. Julius Wamey, a TV journalist mentioned the piece in a segment of popular TV program: he was swiftly sanctioned and ended up in exile. The "A" question has since become banal, though more acute (cf. JUNBAM 1992).
23. These remarks are true for the concept of Francophone.

ethnic affiliation and label. It only adds to the instability and complexity of cultural identification in the interplay of ethnicity and politics.

The process of the enlargement of ethnic territory requires further a comment from an historical perspective. Despite the new political significance attached to them, new ethnic entities are rooted in, or built upon, actual pre-existing cultural similarities among the groups being lumped together. But the underlying idea of the current "ethnic renaissance" merits some attention. For example, the concept "Grassfield" really corresponds to an identifiable cultural area extending approximately from the southern edge of the high plateaus to the Tikar plain in the north. So also is the case with the "Sawa" group. As cultural signifier, the concept of Sawa is rooted in the precolonial and colonial histories of the people of Cameroon's coastal area from Rio del Rey to Campo in the south. The opposition between the coast and the hinterland recalls the historical division of the Wouri estuary between the shore *(mundongo)* and the bush *(koto)*, literally meaning "barrier", two different landscapes referring to two distinctive social categories: the free Duala *(wonja)* of the shore and the domestic slaves *(bakom)* of the interior. In the same way, the notion of "Beti" can be comprehended as a sub-group belonging culturally to the larger Pahouin group which extents from the south-central Cameroon into the neighboring Republics of Gabon, Congo, and Equatorial Guinea[24]. Other ethnic denominations forming the Cameroonian mosaic could, in the same way be replaced in a more or less recent historical context.

The novelty with the current ethnic process(ing) is that it is triggered by contemporary political and economical circumstances. I argue that political engineers have selected terms from a pool of equally valid cultural data that best suit their current political goals so as to produce the desired ethnic alliances: it is the shore area and water deities for the "Sawa"; the forest location and the Fang-Pahouin ethnicity for the "Beti"; the high plateaus and the institution of chieftaincy for the "Grassfield" groups; the British colonial experience for the "Anglophones", and so on. While having some justification, these criteria and ethnic reconfigurations are not the only ones imaginable. For there are equally sound cultural grounds to imagine in Cameroon a large Bantu group with "Sawa" and "Beti", a Proto-Bantu or Semi-Bantu group with the Bamileke, and a non-Bantu group with Pygmies, Fulani, and Sudanic; or a group of "People of the Forest" with the Baya and the Pygmies versus non-Forest dwellers; or "acephalous" societies versus "chiefly" societies, and so on. The point I am trying to make here is that

24. Differences within the Pahouin ensemble are marked by the extent to which the *ewondo* language has affected the dialect of each individual sub-group. Thus, the languages of members of the Pahouin groups such as the Bulu, Fan, Ntumu, or Yebekolo are less affected by the ewondo, than those of the "Beti" group such as the Ewondo, Tsingua, Mbamvele, Eton, Bane whose dialects are close to the *ati*, the language of the Ewondo; Hence the term Beti' ascribed to these groups.

the reconfiguration of ethnic frontiers is a selective, arbitrary, and hence a political process because it depends on particular political situations. In this respect, it is instructive that the labels "Muslims" and "Christians" and the polarity between Nordists and Sudists, so prevalent during Ahidjo's regime, have lost almost all their political and cultural significance. Depending on the circumstances, political engineers choose to emphasize one cultural characteristic over another to satisfy the needs of the moment. But there is a problem with articulating economic and political goals in cultural terms, because the two arenas are not perfectly congruent. Thus, Jean-Jacques Ekindi, a Sawa of the Duala group with political ambition of his own, denounced the appointment of Peter Mafany Musongo, a Sawa of the Bakwari ethnic group, to the position of Prime Minister on no solid ground, except perhaps for the fact that Mafany Musongo was not a Duala: among politicians, broad ethnic solidarity does not hold long in the face of local identity and conflicting interests. Furthermore, the figure of Mafany Musongo stands as a telling example of the multiple and complex layers of new identities being deployed in Cameroon: a Bakweri, a Sawa, a Cameroonian from the South-West province, an Anglophone, and a high-ranked member of the CPDM all together, Mafany Musongo is simultaneously engaged with different cultural and ethnic categories that have conflicting interests at times. Ironically, the cultural flexibility that has enabled politicians to select their allies to suit the needs of the moment has also made the new ethnic alliances subject to change when tensions arise over decreased access to state resources. This situation poses a constant threat to the stability of the pattern of ethnic aggregation and perhaps explains the importance attached to performances of cultural unity as a means of blurring the reality of cultural diversities and regional competition.

In effect, because of the precarious nature of the new ethnic combinations, politicians have attempted assiduously to stabilize ethnic frontiers through cultural performances aimed at promoting images of ethnic and cultural unity and at emphasizing claims of unique ethnic identity. Such performances take form and are expressed in "cultural" associations. Among the Bamileke political entrepreneurs, the *La'akam* plays such a role. The *La'akam* designates the sacred place where Bamileke chiefs and deputy chiefs are initiated to the secrets of their new functions during a forty day period of seclusion (Harter n.d.). A powerful symbol of Bamileke culture, it is now used by some of their political activists and culture brokers to construct and project the image of a united or unified Bamileke "bloc" politically opposed to other ethnic groups. Yet, despite the cultural similarities of the various Bamileke sub-groups, the very existence of individual and different *La'akam* throughout the Bamileke high plateaus is actually indicative of the political independence of each chiefdom. This reality runs contrary to the message of political unity for which the reinterpreted *La'akam* is supposed to stand as symbol. A similar observation can be made with regard to the *Essigan*, the "cultural" association of the Beti people

which had played a political role in pre-independent Cameroon. The term "essigan" is the name given a species of tree from the rainforest; it is supposed to emblemize the strength of the Beti as a group. Yet, the Beti are not organized in chiefdoms, but in lineage groups, a fact that belies from the outset the new claim of political unity expressed by the Beti culture brokers. Like its Bamileke counterpart, the *Essigan* "cultural" association does not correspond to an actual unity among the Beti. Like the redefined *La'akam*, the *Essigan* functions as a political lobbying group for some members of the "Beti" group in the matrix of the new Cameroon political discourse.

The Sawa of the coast, on their part, have taken up the institution and the celebration of the Ngondo festival as an affirmation of their cultural identity and political unity. Originally however, the Ngondo was not an instrument of inclusion, but of social distinction between the Duala groups and non-Duala. Indeed, the high point of the Ngondo festival is marked by the *Njengu* celebration, the cult of the water spirits *(miengu).* Yet, in the Duala history, *Njengu* was a closed society reserved for "free" Duala only; even Duala from the Akwa clan were initially not admitted to participate therein, on the ground that the mother of their ancestor Ngando Kwa was a Basa native[25]. The presently conceived Ngondo as symbol of the political unity of the newly defined Sawa people owes little to history. Tellingly, the description of the Ngondo has been changed from "Assembly of the Duala People" (Wei 1999; Austen 1992; Doumbe Moulongo 1972; Harter 1958) to "Assembly of the Sawa Populations" (Ndoumbe 1997). This redefinition accounts for the broader membership of the Ngondo while also reflecting its contemporary message and agenda of political unity. The fact that the "new Ngondo" is celebrated nationwide, even with water, its key signifying element missing, is further testimony of the changed nature of the present "cultural" performance.

The "Anglophone" identity is not built on any historical mythology or ancestral tradition. But is rooted in the shared experience of the British colonial administration. This is best expressed in the creation of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). By appealing to the experience of British colonialism, Anglophone political activists have tried to construct a common identity which articulates its *problématique* explicitly and directly in political terms without cultural pretenses or rhetoric. Their political agenda is also clear from the outset: regional separation. In this sense, the discourse of the SCNC partakes of, and contributes to, the general diatribe around the concepts of space and local identity. By advocating political separation, it only adds an ominous overtone to current concerns about the future survival of Cameroon as a nation.

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25. For this reason, the Bonanjo called the Akwa people "*Banaku bakom*", meaning that "people from Akwa are slaves".

Simultaneously, another process of ethnic reconfiguration follows a *logic of contraction.* Here, ethnic boundaries are narrowly drawn along village lines according to the principle of the electoral village. Concretely, the politics of the electoral village means that during elections high state officials and urban elite leave their offices and urban homes and head to their respective villages to raise support for CPDM candidates. In presidential campaigns their assignment is to obtain votes for the President and counter the influence of opposition parties. In legislative elections the principle of the electoral village implies that candidates run to represent their respective native villages in the National Assembly, regardless of their actual place of residence. The "village" provision holds different consequences for different categories of Cameroonians. Only a few significant cases will be highlighted here. First of all, it poses a real challenge to Cameroonians of "the Eleventh Province" since they are less likely than others to have social networks and attachments in their parents' "villages of origin". Their chances of winning a legislative election are substantially limited. Second, the electoral village provision forces full-time urban politicians into seasonal rural migrations to their villages during legislative—and presidential—election campaigns. Third, the mid- and long-term effects of this trend for rural candidates are yet to be fully appreciated[26]. Since, the "people from towns" are likely to enjoy greater financial means and extended political networks than their rural opponents, one cannot but wonder whether the latter could effectively be able to compete against them, whether this imbalance would lead to cooperation or to rivalry between the two elite groups. At this stage, however, it seems that the new development has led to an increasing intertwining of local and national politics. On the one hand, many of the newly elected deputies (and mayors) belong to the successful urban elite, who are using their rural constituencies as stepping stones to acquire greater national visibility and claim political legitimacy. On the other hand, the internal rural elite, are using their electoral ballot to squeeze material resources from the urban elite through political dealmaking.

At a different level of analysis, the relocation of legislative politics to the village contributes to the numbers game and ethnic alchemy that have

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26. This reminds of the expression "*vacanciers*", "home leavers" used in many West African countries to ridicule would-be presidents who normally work and reside in the USA or in Europe, and take a home leave during elections to run for presidency. This phenomenon emerged together with the National Conference when "technocrats" Prime Ministers were needed to redress malfunctioning economics; among them: Edem Kodjo in Togo, Nicéphore Soglo in Benin, Alassane Ouatara in Ivory Coast, André Milongo in the Congo Republic. Some of them were even elected presidents. But old-fashioned politicians quickly came back to power with the second tide of presidential elections in the mid-1990s, thus demonstrating that "technocracy" was only a parenthesis in the political life of those African countries. A situation that political scientists have yet to help us understand.

ruled Cameroonian sociopolitical life since Ahidjo's time. This has special significance for the Bamileke politicians. In effect, the village provision can be construed as an electoral version of the quota system instituted earlier in the system of national examinations. For Cameroonian policymakers, this provision is used to make sure that local candidates will obtain a legislative seat, especially if they belong to a minority ethnic group, thereby preventing candidates from a demographically large ethnic group from running against them. The assumption underlying such thinking is that ballots should be cast not on the basis of ideas, but of ethnic affiliations. If one pushes the logic a step further, it appears that the electoral village provision affects primarily the political prospects of the numerous Bamileke people. First, it prevents Bamileke candidates from running for legislative elections in big cities such as Douala and Yaounde where most of them are established and carry on their businesses. Second, it forces would-be Bamileke politicians to seek legislative seats in the confines of their densely populated high plateau. In effect, the electoral village provision can be interpreted ultimately as a stratagem aimed at preventing Bamileke's alleged political influence from spreading all over the country. Third, this policy has another, yet more subtle, impact on a strictly local Bamileke politics. In effect, the odds are great that Bamileke villages exist in which more than one member of their urban elite have political ambitions. This means that the greater number of political candidates running for a relatively limited number of seats within the confines of narrow village boundaries will check one other. To sum up, the electoral village provision has meant fierce internal competition among the Bamileke urban elite and has tended to undermine the discourse of Bamileke unity[27].

The pressure among the Bamileke has resulted in the creation of new territorial units in the high plateaus. Indeed, to satisfy the political ambitions of his influential Bamileke supporters while meeting his own electoral needs, President Biya has carved out new administrative districts and rural municipalities. They provide the urban elite with a "village" anchorage which serves to substantiate their claims of representing something or someone in the rural areas. Indeed, the mayors and deputies of these new electoral "villages" are, not coincidentally, usually successful urban businessmen or state officials with close ties to the regime[28]. The new administrative

27. For instances of elite competition in other ethnic groups, see EYOH (1998).
28. Thus, the Division of Koung-Khi created in 1992 is financially sponsored by Victor Fotso, a wealthy Bamileke Businessman who has also been mayor of the new rural municipality of Pete since 1996. One of his daughters ran for the 1996 legislative election to represent Koung-Khi at the National Assembly. The late Pierre Tchanque, President of the Cameroon Chamber of Commerce, was also the CPDM mayor of the new rural municipality of Bazou, his village. Several other members of the Bamileke urban elite also hold an elected positions either as mayor or deputy in their distant villages. François Njele, the former president of the Cameroon Federation of Cycling, is now mayor of Bandja, his rural village; Alphonse Siyam Siwe, a former member of Biya's Cabinet and current Director of the Cameroon's Port Authority is also deputy of distant Haut-

and municipal units created by Biya in the Bamileke high plateaus exist as so as many political fiefdoms granted to his supporters in order to counter the influence of rival political parties in a region perceived as the seat of the opposition.

Finally, the politics of the electoral village is indicative of a profound and increased intertwining of the urban and rural cultural repertoires in the postcolonial state. Concretely, this is illustrated by the fact that more and more politicians today are appealing to "traditional" institutions of authority as a means of providing political legitimacy in the new paradigm. As mentioned earlier, the village has already become the new focus of political discourse and practice. At a more symbolic level, the movement of the village to the forefront of national politics is expressed in multiple performances of rural identity and village affiliation: initiations into village-based closed societies, the adoption of traditional titles of nobility, and so on[29]. In so doing, politicians expect to translate these signs of symbolic (rural) capital into actual (urban) political gains, eventually exploitable economically. A cursory observation of Cameroon's political scene indicates the presence of princes, notables, chiefs, and other "traditional" elite figures of all varieties and degrees of "authenticity". A prime example of this trend toward the ruralization of national political discourse is the political trajectory of Célestin Bedzigui, founder of the Parti d'alliance libérale (Party of Liberal Alliance, henceforth PAL). Bedzigui's party was made up of a handful of young, urban professionals recruited among his pals (no irony intended) whose lifestyle and mindset were removed from those of the ordinary working poor or village dwellers[30]. Bedzigui's political activism and moderate "opposition"[31] to Biya won him an appointment as Director of the Sacheries du Cameroun, a state-owned plan that manufactured packaging supplies. The company did not survive his appointment and went into bankruptcy. Bedzigui was forced to resignation. After having waited in vain for another appointment, he finally decided to dissolve his party and join a larger organization, the Union nationale pour la démocratie et le progrès (National Union for Democracy and Progress, henceforth UNDP) in 1996. In the process, the former president-founder of the once city-oriented, Douala-based PAL also adopted a new social identity, since he now refers to himself as *Notable Beti* (Beti Notable).

Nkam. André Sohaing, a well-known Douala-based businessman is also the mayor of his rural Bayangam village.

29. For more on that issue, see FISIY & GOHEEN (1998).
30. PAL supporters were known for wearing preferably stylish English tailored shoes as sign of distinction.
31. Casting himself in the self-serving role of "responsible" opposition, Bedzigui supported Biya candidacy during the 1992 presidential elections while denouncing the "irresponsibility" of political parties advocating the convocation of a National Sovereign Conference.

Bedzigui's self-labeling is indicative of a profound shift in his political strategy. But it also highlights the two related tropes in current Cameroon politics: village and ethnicity. Indeed, Bedzigui has played the "village card" with Paul Biya by appealing to his rural roots to stake a claim to village representation and political legitimacy: "He [Paul Biya] knows quite well that the populations of the Lekie for whom I can objectively speak today have been abandoned" (quoted by Akam 1997: 7). He has played the "ethnic card" with the UNDP leadership: Bedzigui's decision to join that particular party was not an act of pure coincidence, or even ideological conviction, but should be read against the backdrop of the ethnic alchemy that has guided the policy of "national integration" for decades. Indeed, as a "Beti" (like the president) political opponent in a northern-based, Fulani-dominated party, Bedzigui can count on the principle of ethnic equilibrium to boost his declining political career by opening a special place for him.

In reality, the current political commerce between the villages and the cities, with its emphasis on the rural and the urban processes of political legitimization, are not a novelty in Cameroonian politics. President Biya set the trend himself when he came to power in 1982 by bringing his hitherto unknown native village of Nvomeka'a to national attention and by making it the unofficial center of Cameroonian political life after the failed coup against his regime in 1984. As a newly "appointed" president he also toured the country, collecting "traditional" titles and insignias of nobility and becoming initiated into closed societies nationwide. During his reign, Biya has mixed repertoires of legitimacy and authority from the countryside with categories provided by the outside world (Masonry, Rosicrucianism, and even Christian and Muslim religions), blending together the village and the town, the mundane and the spiritual, in the same thirst for more political power.

Popular Culture as a Space of Mutual Ethnic Acceptance?

Inaugurated by Ahmadou Ahidjo, the policy of regional equilibrium has ultimately led to the widespread and serial production of local identities in Cameroon. This follows two complementary patterns: at a regional level it tends to expand the geographic frontiers of ethnic identities, while at the village level, it focuses on delineating the boundaries of political fiefdoms among influential members of the urban elite in the name of "tradition". This process has de-emphasized the concept of Cameroon both as a geographical entity and as a nation, called into question the idea of a common Cameroonian citizenship, and emphasized ascriptive local identities and regional associations. The emergence in the political lexicon of such concepts as *autochtones, allogènes,* or *étrangers* illustrates this trend. The aim of the autochtony provision was allegedly to protect ethnic "minorities"; however, the Cameroonian legislators neglected clearly to define the key

concept of "autochtones", and what it actually entails from a geographical, historical, and genealogical perspective. How far back in time should one travel to determine who *the* first settlers on a given piece of land really were? Which historical benchmarks should be used to determine the "end" of centuries-long population migrations ? Which genealogical affiliation matters in settling land claims? Which mode of acquisition guarantied land rights? And which types of land right for that matter? None of these questions were addressed or envisioned by the legislators. In the context of current relations in Cameroon, such an imprecision could lead to deadly conflicts. Even more disturbing than this legislative oversight is the failure of opposition leaders to debate this arbitrary provision which could be a cause for national outrage.

Professional politicians have thus manipulated the concept of ethnicity and cultural identity to shore up their political base and advance their careers[32]. On the other hand, some Cameroonians artists have drawn upon the country's cultural diversity to enrich their work. In the process they have presented the public with a counter-vision of society that marks an ideological break with the dominant political discourse. Donny Eldwood is one such artist who has used popular culture as a vehicle of mutual ethnic acceptance, and respect of human dignity. His song tellingly entitled "Monsieur le Pygmée" is worth quoting extensively.

Ratatiné et le nez épaté
Vous avez deviné je suis pygmée...
Je suis né sous un grand palétuvier
Mes dents ont aussitôt été taillées
Pour mieux croquer du gibier boucané
Car un pygmée c'est un grand carnassier
Rien n'a changé depuis l'antiquité
Dans la civilisation des pygmées...
La forêt c'est notre univers sacré
Nous y vivons notre authenticité...
A moitié nus sous les palétuviers
Pour ne pas ressembler aux sangliers
Qui promènent toute leur nudité
Les écorces cachent notre intimité...
Quand un "civilisé" vient voir un pygmée
C'est quand son poste est déjà menacé
C'est quand sa femme veut déjà divorcer
C'est quand il veut déjà être nommé...
C'est quand un match de foot veut être gagné

32. Cameroonian politicians do not hold the monopoly of this practice. Members of the ruling party in Ivory Coast may soon surpass them with their dubious concept of "Ivoirité" (state of being Ivoirian?), which is the dividing line between those who can legally run a political party and those who cannot...

C'est là qu'on pense à moi monsieur le pygmée
Je suis sûr d'une seule réalité...
Les vrais civilisés ce sont les pygmées
Je suis pygmée et je reste pygmée...[33]

The Pygmies are one of the most neglected minority groups in Cameroon. They lack social visibility as well as political significance. Though the majority of Cameroonians have never seen a Pygmy, most of them use that term to ridicule short people. The celebration of pygmy ethnic identity by Donny Elwood is therefore significant in several ways. First, his song help raise the average Cameroonian's awareness of the Pygmies as social group. Second, Elwood's Pygmy character, who addresses himself as *Monsieur* and claims the status of a "civilized person", makes a conscious attempt to establish a self-defined social identity, and more importantly, counter the prevailing stereotypes about Pygmies[34]. Finally, the fact that Donny Elwood himself is not a Pygmy stands as a powerful statement of the role that popular artists play in shaping a public space of mutual ethnic acceptance in Cameroon.

But Elwood is not an isolated case. Considered from a political standpoint, the celebration of local identities in Cameroon has served to divide different ethnic groups. Yet from a cultural perspective, Cameroonian artists and art promoters have succeeded in using cultural difference to produce

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33. Shrunken and flat nosed,
You guessed it, I'm a Pygmy
No sooner was I born under a big mangrove tree
Than I grew sharp teeth
The better to bite into smoked game
"cause a Pygmy's" a tremendous carnivore
Nothing's changed since antiquity
In Pygmy's culture
The forest's our sacred universe
That's where we live out our authenticity
Half naked under the mangrove trees
So as not to look like boars
Who go around stark naked
Bark covers our private parts
When a "civilized" man comes to see a Pygmy
It's when his job is in jeopardy
When his wife already wants a divorce
When he already wants an appointment
When a soccer match needs to be won
That's when he thinks of me, Mr. Pygmy
I am sure of a single truth
The truly civilized are Pygmies
A Pygmy I am and a Pygmy I'll remain.

34. He does this by enunciating a counter-discourse on civilization that celebrates the nude, the raw, and the unsophisticated. Elwood's critique here reaches far beyond the realm of Cameroon socio-politics and touches upon the academic debate about the limits of Western cultural hegemony and monopoly of taxonomy and knowledge production (PRAKASH 1994).

a popular culture that has help establish a sphere of ethnic tolerance and respect. Several other Cameroonian artists before Elwood had expressed similar messages of mutual ethnic acceptance in their work. The importance of sports in general, and soccer in particular (with such superstars as Roger Milla), as powerful instrument and example of ethnic tolerance in Cameroon is well known and needs no further emphasis here. In music, Petit Pays, a native Duala artist, proclaimed in his first release that his mother was Duala and his father a Hausa. The Duala born musician Ben Decca had composed lyrics in Bamileke dialects, while many Francophone musicians have sung in English. In stand up-comedy, the French speaking comedian Dave K. Moktoï won fame in the late 1970s early 1980s by impersonating *L'homme bien de là-bas,* a very self-conscious upscale Anglophone man.

The most interesting illustrations of the role of art as vehicle of ethnic acceptance are, nevertheless to be found in instances of contrasts or even collisions between politics and culture. In February 1997, the Sawa elite organized "anti-Bamileke rallies" in the city of Douala, but in the meantime Petit Pays was singing his admiration for these very same Bamileke. In the late 1996 early 1997, the democratic process in Cameroon was enmeshed in ethnic politics and rhetoric between Bamileke and Duala ethno-culture brokers was hot. Yet, Marilyn Douala-Bell Schaub of the Bell chiefly family, an *avant-garde* art promoter, set up a monumental statue christened *Statue de la Nouvelle Liberté* (Statue of the New Liberty) executed by a Bamileke sculptor (Elimbi). In 1991-92 the Bamileke *La'akam,* called on the boycott of beers manufactured by the "Brasseries du Cameroun", a state- and French-owned brewing company known to be associated with the Beti Paul Biya. But it is not unlikely that Bamileke natives nationwide were dancing at the beat of *bikutsi,* the "Beti music", or were laughing at the Beti comedian, Jean-Michel Kankan's impersonation of your "typical Bamileke man".

These and other examples underscore the fact that popular culture, even when presented or promoted by politicians as "ethnic" music (as was once the case with *bikutsi* music), ultimately provides a public space of mutual ethnic acceptance in Cameroon. They all serve to illustrate what Célestin Monga means when he declares that "one cannot confine the study of African countries in the analysis of their sociopolitical or economic structures alone" (Monga 1991: 31)[35]. As regards the future of Cameroon as a nation,

35. In music, this is so whether the artists adopt a "rebellious" stance like Fela, Lapiro de Mbanga, Les Salopards, Poussins Choc, or Myriam Makeba; take a "softer" approach like Lokua Kanza, Cesario Evora, Henri Dikongue, or Richard Bona to name but the newest talents in that domain; opt for a "truly leisure" beat like Charlotte Mbango, Kofi Olomide, Grace Decca, Papa Wemba, Petit Pays, or Meiway; or for a more "intellectual" genre as in the case of Francis Bebey, Pierre Akendegue, Ray Lema, Manu Dibango, and most recently Donny Elwood. Each in their own style and sensitivity, these artists are formulating

however, one cannot but wonder how long popular culture will be able to stand as the last line of defense against the onslaught of ethnic politics, social injustice, material deprivation and political disenfranchisement.

Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the emergence of the concept of "village" as a new paradigm for popular representation through a study of the interplay of space, ethnic identity, and electoral politics in a context of competition for decreasing state resources. Cameroonian politicians are exploiting cultural differences by engaging in political discourses that couch cross-ethnic economic inequalities and social injustice in regional terms. Posing as representatives of their villages they redesign rural boundaries, act as culture brokers, and use rural constituencies to boost their careers. This dual process of ethnicization and ruralization of politics has developed close connections between urban and rural elite, with the latter gaining substantial political significance. While politicians are using culture as a divisive force, some artists are providing a space for mutual ethnic acceptance through popular culture.

RÉSUMÉ

"Au village!": la production du local dans la politique camerounaise. — Cet article analyse le concept de "village" en tant que nouveau paradigme de la représentation populaire, à travers l'étude de l'interaction entre l'identité ethnique et la politique électorale envisagées dans un contexte de compétition accrue autour d'une rente étatique déclinante. Les politiciens camerounais exploitent les différences culturelles en forgeant un discours politique qui transcrit les inégalités économiques transethniques et l'injustice sociale en termes régionalistes. Se posant comme des représentants de leurs propres villages, ils redessinent les frontières rurales, se comportent comme des intermédiaires culturels et utilisent les circonscriptions rurales pour doper leur carrière politique. Ce double processus d'ethnicisation et de ruralisation de la vie politique a entraîné le développement de liens étroits entre l'élite urbaine et rurale, cette dernière y gagnant une visibilité politique accrue. Par ailleurs, alors que les politiciens utilisent la culture comme une force de division, certains artistes, par le biais de la culture populaire, parviennent à définir un espace de communication transethnique.

Keywords/*Mots-clés:* Ahmadou Ahidjo, Paul Biya, electoral village, ethnic identities, ethnic quotas, multiparty elections, regional equilibrium, regionalism, village affiliation/*Ahmadou Ahidjo, Paul Biya, appartenance villageoise, élections multipartistes, équilibre régional, identités ethniques, quotas ethniques, régionalisme, villagisation politique.*